

CHAPTER I

TRADITIONAL KOREA

Before we proceed with this account of the culture of contemporary North Korea, it is necessary to describe briefly some outstanding features of the culture of pre-Communist times as a frame of reference for understanding modern conditions. Knowledge of the pre-Communist culture of Korea is useful in another way, since, as later passages will show, the undesirable features of traditional life have been a center of attention in Communist North Korea. The deplorable conditions of former times have been thoroughly exploited as an aid in ideological indoctrination.

By "traditional Korea," I mean principally the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910), which was followed by Japanese colonial rule until 1945. Although some important cultural traits including modern technology and social, economic, and political institutions were added during the period of Japanese control, innovations brought by the Japanese appear to have had little effect on the core of the traditional culture. The sketch that follows is based primarily upon early ethnographic descriptions made by Korean scholars and foreign missionaries.

During the reign of the Koryo Dynasty (935-1392), which preceded the Yi Dynasty, Buddhism provided the principal ideology for governmental operation. The state was dominated by warriors and Buddhist monks, and scholars were virtually eliminated from positions of political authority. The succeeding Yi Dynasty launched its reign as a reaction against political domination by Buddhism and by warriors. For the scholarly class, which had long been alienated from political power, the founding of the Yi Dynasty was a great victory over the warriors and Buddhist monks. The new ruling class, largely consisting of scholars, enthusiastically adopted Confucianism as a political ideology, particularly Neo-Confucianism as revised by Chu Hsi of the Sung Dynasty of China, and called themselves subjects of the Emperor of the Ming Dynasty of China. Yi Korea became a tribute state of China. Although Confucianism was adopted as an antithesis of Buddhism, it deeply penetrated every aspect of the sociocultural system of Yi Korea. Buddhism declined greatly in importance. Following the loss of its material basis by the expropriation of vast areas of land owned by Buddhist temples and the concomitant growth of strong governmental opposition which lasted

throughout the entire Yi era, Korean Buddhism lost the glory of its past and failed to maintain close relationships with the people in their everyday lives.

Yi Korea was a highly stratified society. Four social classes were formally recognized: *yangban*, *chungin*, *sangmin*, and *ch'onmin*. The term *yangban*, literally meaning "both classes," once denoted both military and civil officials. After political power came into the hands of the scholarly class, the term changed to mean the class of scholar-officials, which constituted the privileged, ruling class monopolizing governmental positions. The Yi Dynasty was created as a result of a military coup, and those who had actively taken a part in the coup or helped afterward in founding the monarchy were given *yangban* status as well as governmental posts. People of lower social class were supposedly able to attain *yangban* status by passing civil service examinations, but this policy seems never actually to have been followed during the entire duration of the Yi Dynasty. Only descendants of *yangban* families were allowed to take the various examinations.

Chungin, "middle men," is a general term for administrative functionaries at various levels of government. These included the professional clerical staffs of ministries and offices of the central government in the capital and elsewhere in the nation. Also included in this class were interpreters, astronomers, physicians, county clerks, and professional military officers. Although they were few in number, the *chungin*, in particular the county clerks (*ajon*), were very important in the people's lives, since they were the means of communication between the rulers and the ruled, and, locally at least, were the rulers in fact.

About three-fourths of the population consisted of commoners, *sangmin*. Peasant cultivators were the largest single occupational group and sub-class. Merchants and artisans were also commoners, but their social status was below that of cultivators. The commoner class alone was subject to taxation and military service. At the bottom of the social strata were the *ch'onmin*, or "despised people." These were divided into two occupational categories, public and private. *Ch'onmin* in public service included public entertainers, court maids (servants), male servants in government service, servants in government travel stations and rest houses, jailkeepers, official female slaves, fugitives from justice, and criminals. The private class included Buddhist monks and nuns, messengers, actors and entertainers, female shamans, professional mourners and keepers of memorial tablets, executioners, shoemakers, and an outcast group called *paekchong*. Among the despised classes, the *paekchong* were uniquely low, defiled, and defiling to others. They engaged in small handicrafts such as basketry, butchering, leatherworking, and straw-sandal making, and lived in segregated communities (Passin 1956:37-44).

In Yi Korea, Confucianism had served as the ideological support for the *yangban* class in ruling the people and justifying the social hierarchy, a sub-

ject that will later be discussed in detail. Neo-Confucian elements utilized by the *yangban* spread rapidly, principally because detailed knowledge of them constituted the core of the civil service examinations. Since these examinations, called *kwago*, were the only legitimate avenue to officialdom, young males of the *yangban* class devoted much effort to studying Confucian classics.

Confucian influence on the Korean culture of the time may be distinguished by two major aspects, Confucian metaphysics and Confucian ethics. Prominent Confucian intellectuals of Yi Korea engaged in endless debates on various philosophical subjects including human nature, "the supreme ultimate," man's place in the universe, and cosmological speculation. Confucian metaphysics provided rich resources for these intellectual exercises, particularly during the second half of the Yi Dynasty. Beyond having importance in factional disputes in Yi Korea's politics, however, these intellectual activities and pastimes seem to have had little direct importance to the nation as a whole and were exclusively a custom of the elite.

Confucian ethics were important to everyone and constituted the moral standards of Yi society. During the period of over five hundred years of the Yi Dynasty, the Confucian system of ethics became institutionalized and firmly integrated into Korean culture. Confucian ethics concerned primarily rules and standards of human relations, among which the ideals of the "five human relationships" constituted the core: the relationship between father and son, master and subject, husband and wife, the aged and the young, and between friends. The ideals of privilege and obligation of the five relationships are said to have developed on the basis of the relatively egalitarian society of China, and all five precepts were organized into a harmonious whole. But, as the Introduction notes, when these precepts reached Korea they underwent various changes. Most notable among these is the great emphasis placed on the relationship between father and son, which became far more important in Korea than the other relationships. Filial piety became the supreme virtue of the Yi era, and all other relationships were believed to stem from it. For example, it was believed that loyalty to one's master could not be achieved unless filial piety to one's parents, especially to the father, had first been demonstrated. In cases of conflict between filial piety and loyalty to the ruler, the former held pre-eminence. It was not uncommon in Yi Korea for an exemplary son to be rewarded by the court in various ways, including exemption from taxes, the erection in his honor of monumental columns or temples, and even appointment to public office (Dallet 1954:129). Moreover, upon the death of his father, a proper son was expected to resign from his government post and give himself over to mourning. In some cases, a son built near the parent's tomb a small house in which he remained for several years, thereby acquiring high renown for saintliness and veneration (ibid.:136).

The marked difference that existed between the Japanese and Korean adaptations of Confucianism is worthy of note. As in Yi Korea, Tokugawa Japan (1603-1868) adopted Neo-Confucianism as a state philosophy. Japan also accepted the idea of the five relationships. Among the five precepts, however, the relationship between master and subject was given supreme attention, as expressed in the concept of *chu*, the sense of duty to the emperor. As Ruth Benedict (1946:119) described the circumstances, when filial piety came into conflict with one's obligation to the emperor, *chu* stood first. The Japanese case provides a key toward gaining an understanding of the Confucianism of traditional Korea. Korea lacked the extremely nationalistic ideals of Japan and failed to integrate members of society into a national network. The Korean emphasis upon filial piety, coupled with the importance placed upon purity of lines of descent, discouraged social integration on the national level. Close unity in Yi society was confined to lineages sharing descent from prestigious ancestors.

The Confucian emphasis on legitimacy of birth was accepted and widely applied in Korea, chiefly in the matter of dynastic succession. Endless struggles over the transmission of political power during the Yi Dynasty centered on the question of legitimacy. On the family level, the emphasis on legitimacy resulted in strong social discrimination against illegitimate children. The stress on purity of descent, which was supported and justified by the principle of legitimacy, eliminated illegitimate children from succession in family lines, even when families lacked legitimate sons, and barred them from all avenues toward officialdom (Pak Chi-won 1957).

Korea accepted almost every ceremonial symbol of Confucianism, particularly those of *Chu Hsi Chia Li* (Chu Hsi's Family Rituals). Confucian ceremonies of marriage, funerals, post-funereal mourning rites, and other ceremonies related to ancestor worship were strictly observed without any substantial modification of their Chinese form. Rites of ancestor veneration were especially important in maintaining solidarity among kin, although these ceremonies otherwise had little importance in social unification.

The basic framework of Korean kinship terminology is that of Confucian Chinese culture. Koreans recognized a wide range of kin relationships with distinctive kin terms, the majority of which were of Chinese origin. Even today, native Korean terms exist only for close kin. The Chinese system of *wu fu*, the classification of kin by five mourning costumes according to their degree of consanguineal relationship, was accepted in Korea without modification.

Since agriculture was the major and virtually the only source of state revenue in Yi Korea, it is useful to examine the landholding system of the time in order to understand the circumstances of life of most of the population. From the beginning, the Yi government took no steps to give ownership of land to its tillers. Although a statewide land survey was

conducted at the outset of the Yi regime in an effort to gather accurate information on the area of arable land, the redistribution of land that followed reaffirmed the continuity of the old class system, leaving the vast majority of the population as tenant farmers. The only marked difference in land holdings as compared with circumstances under the Koryo Dynasty was that Buddhist temples ceased to be major landlords. The arable lands previously owned by the temples came into the hands of the *yangban* bureaucrats.

In Yi Korea, the state was the supreme landlord of the nation, and no private individual or kinship group could "own" land. This circumstance made the majority of the rural population subject to the manipulations of the *yangban*, who actually controlled the land. Cultivated land was divided into two categories, private land (*sajon*) and public land (*kongjon*). The government controlled both types of land either directly or indirectly. "Private land" meant land to which private individuals were given by the state the right of use but not of ownership. Civil servants were given fixed amounts of land according to their rank, the yields from which were regarded as payment for their services. A few people, called merit subjects (*kongsin*), were given land for distinguished service in the establishment of the Yi Dynasty. In addition, the monarch often granted land to people who excelled in service to the state by acts such as successfully completing diplomatic missions or providing information about rebellions. People who received land in this way were nearly always *yangban*. According to custom, the landholders did not themselves work as cultivators. Some tilled their land by using slaves or poor peasants as laborers, but the majority rented their lands. Thus, in the management of private land intermediaries existed between the supreme landlord (the state) and the actual tillers, but these intermediaries were the *de facto* landlords.

Civil servants were required to return their land to the state when they left their posts. Except for forty-three "merit subjects" who were given land and slaves for their services in assisting to found the monarchy and who were allowed to control their land permanently, holders of private land theoretically kept the land only during their lifetimes. Upon death, the land was to be returned to the government. This rule, however, was often violated by descendants with political power, who retained rights to the land as *de facto* private property.

Public land was utilized directly by the central government or its agencies to finance governmental operations. Like private land, some of the holdings were cultivated by private individuals of the peasant class on a rental basis. Otherwise, public land was cultivated by slaves, soldiers, and, to a greater extent, by *corvée* labor, or uncompensated contribution of "owed" labor, of peasant tenant farmers. The income from public land went directly to the central government or its agencies. In this matter public land differed from private land since it involved no private individuals as intermediaries.

Tenant farmers cultivating private land paid in rental at least 60% of the total proceeds. Fifty per cent was paid in rent and 10% as agricultural tax (Pak Chi-won 1960:271). In addition, tenants paid other kinds of taxes, which at one time reached a total of forty-four kinds (Ho Chong-ho 1965:81). As noted earlier, they were also required to contribute uncompensated labor in the cultivation of public land. Peasants similarly worked without compensation in various public construction projects, and occasionally they were required to pay tribute of local specialty products to the central government.

Monarchs of Yi Korea were characteristically weak, and the *yangban* bureaucrats actually ruled the people, showing little concern toward improving their conditions of life. As time passed, an increase in the *yangban* population and the limited number of official positions resulted in a long succession of factional disputes among the *yangban* class and corrupt government. The demoralization of Yi bureaucrats is well recorded in the monumental ethnographic works by the scholars of *Silhak'p'a*, the School of Practical Learning, such as Song Hyon (1439-1504), Yu Hyong-won (1622-1673), Yi Ik (1682-1763), Pak Chi-won (1737-1805), Pak Chae-ga (1750-1805), and Chong Yag-yong (1762-1836). The ruling elite spent a good deal of its time in reciting poems and taking a part in philosophical discussions, neglecting official duties. In many cases, the local clerks (*ajon*) were the actual rulers. As Chong Yag-yong (also known as Chong Ta-san) describes them, the *ajon* regarded the farmers as their land to till, people from whom they could extract money in the same way as the farmers reap a livelihood from their soil (1969, Vol. I:269). Chong Yag-yong reports that it was not uncommon for the *ajon* to collect from the farmers as much as four times the amount of the agricultural taxes which they actually delivered to the Board of Taxation in the capital (ibid.:202-203). Serving as intermediaries, the *ajon* operated in their own political and financial interests, cheating their superiors and similarly manipulating and exploiting the farmers. County magistrates were quite often replaced because of pressures of factionalism, but the *ajon* usually remained indefinitely at the same posts because they had good knowledge of local circumstances that was valuable for administrative purposes. For the average farmer, the *ajon* were the class which was most hated and feared.

During the second half of the Yi Dynasty, the bureaucratic system had become so corrupt that its numerous official positions were overtly or covertly purchased. Oh Chi-yong (1940:98) states that appointment to a high public office was regarded as "going out to make money or to become a gold mine contractor." Since those who held such offices had invested a good deal of money in bribes to gain their appointments, it followed that they would seek prompt recovery of their investments by abusing their executive powers. Such impropriety on the part of officials was firmly institutionalized during the

latter half of the dynasty. Yi Ik (1972:83) describes the conditions of the time in a way that appears to be somewhat exaggerated, stating that if bribery and extortion were eliminated, the high officials and local clerks could hardly have survived for lack of food. Harassment of farmers by such ill-founded charges as "undutifulness to parents," "failure to maintain cordiality with close relatives and neighbors," "committing incest," and "failure to pay respect to the *yangban*," was one of the common means of extorting money (Oh Chi-yong 1940:99). The peasants' attitude toward the village *yangban* is well illustrated by their custom of frightening their children by telling them that the *yangban* is coming and otherwise menacing them with these evil beings (Dallet 1954:104).

When impoverished families found it necessary to abandon their homes because of inability to pay taxes, their neighbors or relatives were expected to assume the responsibility of payment (Yi Ik 1972:101). It was not uncommon for poor villagers voluntarily to become slaves of the relatively few wealthy landlords to escape from the harshness of the *yangban* (Dallet 1954:115). Peasants worked out strategies to cope with governmental corruption. On the village level, communal funds to which all village households contributed were the most common way of meeting the extortive demands of *ajon* and *yangban*. Communal funds were also used to pay for public facilities used for marriages, burials, and the like, and they were also used for unforeseen expenses other than the extortions of the bureaucrats (ibid.:113). Some villages formed mutual aid associations called *igye* which functioned solely to bribe local government officials to reduce exorbitant taxes (*Ryoksa Kwahak*, 1965, No. 1:63). Landlords often initiated among their tenants the establishment of mutual aid associations called *hogye* to bear the responsibility for the payment of rents collectively when necessary. If a tenant failed to pay his rent because of a poor harvest, the association took the responsibility (ibid.:63). Thus the incomes of the landlords were guaranteed, but the tenants had no such safeguards against misfortune of any kind.

The manner of political control of Yi Korea appears to have exerted strong influence on the nation's social organization and especially on its technological development. As noted earlier, among the *yangban*, the most vigorous years of the lifespan were devoted to preparation for the civil service examination. The agony of years of preparation was rewarded by the omnipotence of bureaucratic power, if the *yangban* succeeded in passing the examinations and was appointed to high office. The power of office could bring almost anything: particularly, it brought wealth and prominence to one's lineage, which, in return, often brought high positions for the generations that followed. But the strong dominance by scholar-officials in Yi Korea seriously inhibited the growth of one of the essential forces of socio-cultural development, that is, the development of technology. According to the Chinese-derived occupational rating generally accepted in traditional

Korea, scholar-officials (*sa*) had the topmost rating. They were followed in descending order by peasants (*nong*), craftsmen and artisans (*kong*), and merchants (*sang*). Far below, and apart from all others, were the *ch'onmin*, the despised people. The three categories of commoners composed a single class, but they were not treated equally. Although the merchants, who were mostly peddlers, had the lowest status among the commoners, they were relatively free from institutional exploitation by the *yangban* class. Toward the end of Yi Korea, the merchants acquired wealth and developed into a social class with great political power. The circumstances of craftsmen and artisans differed. To the end of the Yi era, they were looked down upon and exploited by the members of the *yangban* class, who were not interested in encouraging them to improve their skills and often underpaid them. As a result, craftsmen and artisans took little pride in their work. The noted scholar Yu Hyong-won (1962 I:165-166) describes the circumstance under which this class of citizens lived during the second half of the seventeenth century. Whenever the court in the capital needed their services, they were brought in, but they were paid poorly on the grounds that the work was for the court. Local governmental authorities treated craftsmen and artisans in the same way, as did influential families that were not of the bureaucratic class. Under these circumstances, craftsmen and artisans were reluctant to do their work skillfully for fear of increased exploitation, and no stimulus toward improving performances and techniques existed.

Furthermore, local administrative officials tended not to care about technological innovations, since political activities at the capital were their major concern. Generally, the most important techniques of artisans and craftsmen were barely transmitted and preserved, without improvement, through patrilineal lines of succession as a means of gaining a livelihood. The unfavorable conditions under which the craftsmen and artisans worked, however, resulted in the loss of various technological processes. The manufacture of ceramics is a noteworthy example. Korean ceramic techniques were greatly admired by the Japanese and were introduced into Japan in the latter part of the sixteenth century, when Japanese military forces under the command of Toyotomi Hideyoshi invaded Korea but were unsuccessful in establishing control of the nation. These techniques are generally regarded as a great contribution toward the development of Japanese pottery making (Reischauer and Fairbank 1958:590; Moose 1911:139). The most advanced of these techniques did not survive in Korea. Henderson (1969:136) states, "It is fairly clear that the end of a brilliant ceramic industry which had lasted fifteen hundred years in Korea was motivated in important part by the fact that the potters were despised specialists in a society which, in 1883, was offering increasing mobility for those many within it who were not sharply identified as specialists."

The Confucian class system of Yi Korea resulted in still another condition fatal to economic and technological development, a distaste for manual labor. J. Robert Moose, an American missionary who spent ten years in Korea during the final stage of the Yi Dynasty, describes the *yangban* as follows (1911:99, 101):

The fact that he is a gentleman is sufficient ground for him to excuse himself from everything in the shape and form of common labor. He is born to rule—that is to hold office and get his living by the labor of other men's hands. The passion to hold office and to rule seems to be one of the strongest in the breast of the *yangban*; to obtain worldly honor and power is the goal which has been placed for him, and toward the obtaining of this he bends whatever energy he may be disposed to use.

Our village gentlemen [*yangban*] is strictly opposed to undertaking anything that looks like manual labor. He may be ever so poor—yes, even dependent on others for his daily rice—but to get out and work is out of his line of business. It is no disgrace for him to go hungry, but to engage in any sort of manual labor would at once lower his standing as a gentleman and ruin his prospects for future promotion along the lines which gentlemen only are supposed to travel.

In summary, Yi Korea may be described as a society that never achieved a high degree of integration and that contained various self-destructive features. The ancient Confucian ideal of the state as a family never materialized, and on the village level, the population was exploited by the bureaucrats and the wealthy *yangban* families. The emphasis upon filial piety and ancestral worship helped to maintain solidarity among members of kin groups, but it made no contribution toward national integration and, if anything, served as a divisive force. Subordination of the economy to the interests of politics, the lack of prestige for technical skill, the *yangban*'s distaste for manual labor, and the poverty and otherwise miserable conditions of life of the majority of the population appear to have invited the collapse of the social system.

In the pages which follow, as modern conditions of Communist life are discussed under topical headings, additional and more detailed information will be given on relevant social arrangements, associated customs, technological matters, and other cultural elements of traditional or Yi Korea. Innovations occurring during the years of Japanese control in the twentieth century will similarly be discussed.